

“Wounded Narratives: Jewish Childhood Recollections in Post-soviet Autobiographical Discourse”

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Recent studies of Russian autobiography in both Russia and in the West (cf. Irina Paperno, Valery Podoroga, and Irina Savkina, among others) all address perplexing issues, such as the complexity of the contemporary autobiographical narrative, the difficult position (created by choosing one’s own life as a source of creative inspiration) that an autobiographer must overcome, the moral dilemmas the author faces, and the psychological restraints under which such narratives inevitably take shape. I posit that the explicit dialogical nature of contemporary autobiography made it highly susceptible to postmodernist experiments of various kinds of genre “mutations” that put into question the entire concept of autobiographical “truth,” as it inscribed fiction as a legitimate element into the realm of personal narrative.

In my investigation of childhood recollections in post-soviet autobiographical discourse, I will focus on one such “mutation” of the genre as exemplified in the merging of two narrative models known to Russian literature in its depiction of childhood: the concept of the “happy, happy childhood” of an aristocratic boy as depicted in Leo Tolstoy’s reminiscences, and the “anti-childhood” model that was introduced by Maxim Gorky in his work *Childhood* (the first part of his autobiographical trilogy), which is replete with recollections of pain, loss, and, most of all, social injustice that dominated the author’s experiences. Both writers created their own mythologized worlds in which fiction and reality intermingled while being subordinated to the formation of a specific worldview. Soviet literature successfully adopted both such examples of childhood, albeit in a somewhat reversed order: socialist childhood experience became the realization of the “happy life” model, while the anti-childhood paradigm was reserved for the pre-revolutionary as well as the “capitalist,” foreign childhood.

As I will demonstrate in my analyses of autobiographical accounts of childhood proffered by Yuri Karabchevsky, Dina Rubina, and Aleksander Melikhov, both the “happy” soviet childhood and the anti-childhood narrative fused together to reflect upon the complex duality of the Jewish child’s experience—namely, her/his formal belonging to the world of the happy socialist childhood juxtaposed with the painful experience of being treated differently, as well as the self-awareness of her/his Jewish identity and discomfort (and sometimes shame) in publicly recognizing it. The need to write the story of their Jewish childhood allowed these writers to address the issue of identity anxiety, thus engaging in fact in the act of *scriptotherapy*, which Suzette Henke identifies as “the process of writing out and writing through traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic reenactment.”